

WFWP Oregon holds its Sixth Annual Peace Conference in Gresham, Oregon

RoseAnn Kennett
April 24, 2019



The sixth annual peace conference, entitled "Peace and Justice from the Heart", was held on April 24, 2019, at Mount Hood Community College in Gresham, Oregon, near the scenic Columbia Gorge. The weather was sunny and clear, and more than 100 people attended. The event was spearheaded by the WFWP Oregon chapter and co-sponsored by the Mount Hood Community College, West Columbia Gorge Rotary Club and the International Sufi School.

This year the conference collaborated with the college campus's annual Global Breakfast, which featured a variety of foods from various countries and multi-cultural entertainment. Several people who came to this breakfast also attended our event.

After the breakfast, the program officially began at 11:30am as participants were welcomed by RoseAnn Kennett, WFWP Oregon Co-Chairwoman and academic advisor with TRIO Student Support Services. Introductory remarks were given by Christine Edwards, a WFWP member; Craig Ward, president of the West Columbia Gorge Rotary Club; and Claudia Al-Amin, WFWP Oregon Co-Chairwoman and Pacific Northwest representative of the International Sufi School - the School of Peace and Service.

This was followed by a special invocation. Dr. Linda Nishikawa, WFWP West Regional Director and Pueblo Tribal Member, began by acknowledging the First Nations Peoples of Oregon, the nine federally recognized indigenous Native American tribes. Each tribal group was announced while the audience stood up. She then introduced Trish Jordan, Executive Director of Red Lodge and a Creek Tribal Member. Trish acknowledged the extinct First Nations Peoples of Oregon Native American Indigenous Tribes, then blessed the conference with a Native American Prayer Song.

Immediately following the prayer song came the presentation of the inter-tribal drum group, the Thunderbird Lodge Singers, led by Mr. Miguel Medina, Drum Keeper and Taino Tribal Member. Miguel graciously introduced the drum group and shared the meaning of the ancient songs, which created a sacred atmosphere for all present.

Claudia Al-Amin took the stage to explain the International Sufi School Peacemaker's Exhibit, which consisted of an exhibition of peace banners being displayed all day in the cafeteria, and then the lovely Naomi Etta sang "Wind Beneath My Wings."

Now it was time to welcome the main speakers and presenters of the conference. We were blessed with an amazing group of highly educated and accomplished ladies and gentlemen who shared their experiences in peacemaking: from preventing violence towards girls and women, to nonviolent communication skills, to Middle East peacekeeping, peace in schools, and more!

The keynote address was delivered by Erin Thomas, a [Rotary Peace Fellow](#) and co-founder of the Rotarian Action Group for Peace, which focuses on supporting peace activists and organizations to meet, collaborate and build peace together. In her speech, entitled "Sex and World Peace", Erin noted the need for nations to work together to help protect women worldwide from sexual violence. Violence against women and girls, she argued, continues to be one of the world's most pervasive human rights violations and one of the least prosecuted crimes. She also presented research on how taking steps towards improving the safety of women can reduce national rates of violence.



Following her passionate address, the program then featured a series of breakout sessions on diverse informative topics. For the first hour, participants were divided into two groups, with one group joining Session 1-A with the headline 'Peace in School' and the second group gathering under the topic of 'Everyone can be a Peacebuilder' in Session 1-B.

Session 1-A was led by Maggie Steele, the Adult Programs Coordinator for Peace in Schools, a nonprofit that offers a variety of mindfulness courses and workshops for teens and adults with the goal of promoting compassion and kindness among both students and educators (for more information, check out their website www.peaceinschools.org/).

A licensed school social worker and mindfulness practitioner since 2003, Maggie presented an insightful, research-based message about the multitude of emotional, social and mental health benefits of practicing mindfulness. According to her presentation, these positive outcomes include:

- Improved presence and awareness
- Improved communication skills
- Enhanced overall health
- Increased empathy for oneself and others
- Decreased stress and anxiety
- Increased sense of calm
- Increased emotional resilience
- Better focus and concentration

Maggie cited numerous studies indicating the impact mindfulness classes have had in schools, such as a reported decrease in stress and anxiety by 92% of students who took the class in Portland public schools. Moreover, she added, a nationwide meta-analysis study published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in conjunction with Johns Hopkins in 2014 concluded that "Mindfulness meditation programs improved multiple dimensions of negative affect, including anxiety, depression, and perceived stress/general distress... comparable with what would be expected from the use of an antidepressant in a primary care population."

During this time, the second breakout group 'Everyone Can Be a Peacebuilder' was being facilitated in another room by Reem Ghunaim, Executive Director of the Rotary Action Group for Peace. Reem is a proponent of economic development, strategic and regional planning, and promoting peace through global humanitarian projects. She spoke about her peacebuilding work, which took her to multiple regions including the Middle East, the Pacific Rim region, Europe and the USA.



As an expert on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she encourages intercultural exchanges to enhance mutual understanding. This includes the utilization of art and dance to create social platforms for peacebuilding.

Reem's personal mission is to build mutual understanding on important issues for peace that revolve around compassion, empowering individuality, and embracing differences in a positive light.

After a short break, all the participants were brought back together for the first part of a session on Nonviolent Communication (NVC), offered by NVC educator Doyle Banks. An educator, speaker and life-coach, Doyle presented a double session titled 'Creating Connections Across Aisles, Streets and Tables With The Empathy Advantage'. Participants learned how to tap into their human capacity for empathy to create meaningful connections with one another -- even those with radically different views from their own. Such empathic connections, Doyle explained, have the power to bring reconciliation, healing and peace to life situations such as dating, marriages, families, business environments, spiritual communities and the civil/political arena.



After the first hour, there was a brief break and then participants were offered a choice once more. Some chose to remain with Doyle for the second part of his session, while others moved to the Student Union for an experiential session of the Dances of Universal Peace, facilitated by Michael Sheehan and Michelle Sparkes-Smith.

Michael and Michelle have been a consistent presence at our last six conferences and they bring a spirit of unity, harmony, and intercultural awareness. Everyone participated as they sang sacred mantras from many of the world's spiritual traditions, holding hands and moving together in a circle. Participants left feeling nurtured, revitalized and connected to their true nature, a Universal Peace.



Trish Jordan

The final session at 4pm consisted of a panel discussion led by Drew Assini, instructor at MHCC, Rev. Leon Kackman, prior (chief priest) of the Portland Buddhist Priory, Ernesto Vasquez, MHCC Diversity Resource Center coordinator, Calvin Walker, Academic Adviser and Tomoko Watanabe, WFWP member. It was a lively discussion about peace.

Tomoko Watanabe shared this testimony: "When I think about whether peace is possible or not, I believe it is possible and I would like to share this story. Recently I met a young cashier at a grocery store. She was looking at the badge I was wearing which says 'Peace starts with me'. She said to me, "I like this!" and asked me how I got it. I told her I was going to attend a peace rally on April 6th and she asked me for more information. It was very surprising for me; I realized even young people desire peace inside of their hearts. Because all seek peace in their hearts, I believe peace is possible, even little by little."

The event closed with RoseAnn Kennett's words encapsulating the peace messages of the day and it wrapped up with a Native American Round Dance led by Dr. Linda Nishikawa and the Thunderbird Lodge Singers Native American drummers, bringing us all together in a spirit of unity and peaceful connection as brothers and sisters.